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Exploring Differences in Unconventional Diplomacy

JONATHAN GRIX AND LOUIS GRIX

SEVERAL CONFLUENT FACTORS HAVE LED to the belief that perhaps the global liberal order, which has served to keep peace for generations, is about to be altered beyond recognition. Writing for the World Economic Forum, Robert Muggah rightly points to the inexorable rise of China, the trade wars started by protectionist U.S. President Donald Trump, and an alarming rise in the spread of fake news as contributing factors to a sense that old institutions such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization are under threat.¹ Considering the burgeoning role of digital data, social media, and new technology in disseminating and distorting ideas and ideology, as well as the rapid rise of populist politics across the world, this concern may be well founded. Against such a backdrop, there is widespread agreement among global leaders and academics that states are increasingly seeking ways to acquire “soft power.”² The changing nature of international relations after the end of the Cold War and the risk attached to deploying traditional military forms of power (or “hard power”) has led to “intangible power resources such as culture, ideology, and institutions” becoming more important in inter-state relations.³ This is not to suggest that states no longer use “hard power,” that is, military force or economic sanctions, to get what they want, but rather that there is now a greater role for the politics of attraction in international relations than was

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previously the case. There is also a greater role for channels of unconventional diplomacy involving such diverse organizations as NGOs, language institutes, universities, and key sporting organizations such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Unconventional diplomatic strategies can be conceived as a “soft power package,” a collection of soft power strategies that states draw upon.⁴

In this essay we focus on the role sport plays in this soft power package, in particular the hosting of sports mega-events (SMEs). We do so for three specific reasons. First, the hosting of major sporting events and the belief in their benefits for the host nation has increased in popularity across all political spectrums and a number of regime types. Second, the popularity of the concept of soft power among academics, politicians, think tanks, and the media still offers but a broad-brush depiction of the rationale behind hosting SMEs. Increasingly, it appears self-explanatory that any state should seek to host a SME to grow their soft power. The danger of these explanations is that they mask the *regime type* involved (that is, the type of governance a state has) and whether the state possesses hard power. Thus, our third reason for focusing on sports is to highlight the array of different hosting strategies and rationales. While it is undoubtedly true that the vast majority of sports event hosts wish to make themselves visible on the international stage or enhance their image, the argument that SMEs are tantamount to soft power overlays a number of more nuanced and differential uses of sport for political and economic gain.

We open with a brief discussion of the existing literature on soft power and SMEs. The authors discussed below were among the first to offer any type of critical discussion of the concept of soft power in the context of sport.⁵ We then outline and introduce the major sporting events and states used in our analysis for this piece: all major sports events and their hosts since the turn of the millennium. Our intention is to attempt to characterize specific groups of states according to a number of criteria including their GDP, soft power, regime type (authoritarian or democratic), whether they are a regional power, and the level of the hosted event. These events can be categorized as first-order (e.g., the Olympics or the FIFA World Cup) or second-order (e.g., the Pan-American Games, Commonwealth Games, etc.).⁶ By attempting to categorize the hosts of all the first-order events and many of the most important second-order events for the period of a quarter-century, we offer a clearer understanding of the differences in unconventional diplomacy through SMEs to acquire soft power. As we show below, we discern four state strategies of using SMEs to gain or maintain soft power. We discount the United States, as it is clearly an outlier in terms of the very high levels of both soft and hard power resources it possesses. Our

first category we term “defensive marketing,” a strategy of reinforcing a nation’s already considerable soft power: such states are wealthy, democratic, and also possess high levels of hard power. Second, we identify a “dual soft power strategy,” a strategy which seeks domestic soft power as much as it does international soft power. The best examples of this are authoritarian states which need to shore up domestic political legitimacy in different ways to democratic states, as they lack constitutional accountability. A third strategy is identifiable among wealthy advanced capitalist states who have high levels of soft power, but are less strong on hard power. Such states are “sporting nations” and use SMEs to maintain their soft power resources. Finally, a fourth strategy is that of “emerging states”; many host SMEs with the purpose of overcoming a negative image abroad or in the hope of kick-starting economic growth.

SPORTS MEGA-EVENTS AND SOFT POWER

While soft power has been discussed widely in the mainstream literature, a considerable amount of time passed between Joseph Nye coining soft power in 1990 and its appearance in sports studies literature and analyses. Cull’s 2008 work on China hosting the Beijing Olympics was one of the first pieces to explicitly evoke the notion of soft power in relation to SMEs. Recent years have seen an increase in the use of Nye’s concept of soft power by scholars and commentators attempting to explain why states—including so-called “emerging states”—seek to acquire various forms of cultural and political attraction.⁷ However, within mainstream scholarship in international relations, political science, and sport studies literature, a continuous debate remains as to what actually constitutes soft power, how national leaders and states go about acquiring it, and the success of soft power in both the short and long-term.⁸ For Nye, the “power” side of the concept denotes one’s ability to “effect the outcomes you want, and, if necessary, to change the behavior of others to make this happen.”⁹ For twenty-first century leaders, Nye suggests political outcomes can be achieved through an amalgamation of both hard and soft power strategies.¹⁰ It is this latter approach which Nye calls soft power, or “the ability to achieve goals through attraction rather than coercion.”¹¹ Such attraction converts into power outcomes when those on the receiving end of the soft power strategy look to the state for affirmation, guidance, and leadership, or seek to imitate their domestic and/or international achievements.¹²

The growing popularity of the soft power concept is demonstrated most evidently through the increasing number of academics, politicians, governmental

authorities, private institutions, agencies, and journalists that have attempted to apply, adapt, and/or measure soft power in their discussions of state-led policies.¹³ British Prime Minister Theresa May recently stated that: “We [the United Kingdom] have the greatest soft power in the world—we sit in exactly the right time zone for global trade and our language is the language of the world.”¹⁴ In addition, private agencies have begun producing annual soft power rankings of states. Portland Communication is one of the most widely cited annual rankings, and has developed the yearly “Soft Power 30,” which attempts to measure the soft power properties and subsequent public opinion of states, selecting the top thirty countries based on their diplomatic networks, cultural impact, governmental ideologies, level of education, digital infrastructure, and economic capacity.¹⁵

We now turn to our analysis of past and future hosts in the period from 2000 to 2024, from the 2000 Sydney Olympics to the 2024 Paris Olympics. First, we discuss the key characteristics that we believe need to be considered to make a more nuanced assessment of the use of SMEs by states.

EXPLORING DIFFERENCE: EVENTS AND HOSTS, 2000–2024

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In what follows, we have used a sample of all states that have hosted or will host first-order events from 2000 to 2024 (e.g., all Summer Olympics and FIFA World Cups) and a selection of the most important second-order events from 2000 to 2024 (e.g., Pan American Games, Commonwealth Games, Rugby World Cup, and IAAF World Athletics Championships). In total there are 33 states (plus West Indies and Pan-EU) and 65 events. When analyzing the use of SMEs as a political tool—both domestically and internationally—the focus of the analysis must be broad. To focus solely on, for example, the geographical position of host nations is to overlook various additional and important factors. Thus, we take a more holistic approach to analysis, incorporating multiple areas of investigation in search of correlation between the motivations for hosting mega-events and the characteristics of host nations. These characteristics include a state’s level of conventional power—often termed “hard power”—which encompasses primarily military capability and economic strength, in addition to positions of power in international or supranational organizations, such as the United Nations Security Council or the European Union.¹⁶ Joseph Nye sums up hard power as a state’s ability to use both the carrot and the stick—that is, “the use of coercion and payment.”¹⁷ Given the huge expenses often involved in hosting SMEs, with costs for the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup

invariably in the billions of dollars, one would expect the states with the greatest economic clout to be hosting these sporting showpieces.¹⁸ Furthermore, the level of influence and determination that so-called “great powers” have on the international stage suggests that the hosting of these global events would be an important consideration for them.¹⁹ Combined with this analysis of the impact of levels of conventional power is an analysis of a state’s regional status. Not all regional powers occupy a similar position in the international hierarchy, and many are often overshadowed by external great powers, yet they may still seek to use a mega-event in a manner clearly distinct from a similarly powerful but non-locally dominant state.²⁰ The regime type of host nations is also taken into account, looking for connections between political systems and how the SME hosting is carried out. Finally, we also consider the presence of certain unique characteristics which may cause anomalies in the empirical data and thus do not fit into our categories.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Hard Power

Hard power is undoubtedly the most covered topic when it comes to discussions of geopolitics.²¹ Since the Congress of Vienna in 1814–15, and arguably earlier, the international system has been structured around those states with the greatest ability to flex their hard power muscle—the so-called “great” or “major” powers.²² In 2018, while some of the members of this elite group have changed, the existence of institutions such as the United Nations Security Council and the G7 (formerly the G8) illustrate that the influence of strong states in hard power has not abated.²³ Possessing the ability to wage war and exert economic pressure is a powerful tool in the international geopolitical arena, yet a nation’s hard power bears more than some relevance in discussions of SMEs as well. Mega-events frequently cost billions of dollars, an expense far beyond the means of a majority of states.²⁴ Accordingly, it is no surprise that data suggests the most prestigious events go to “great powers.”

In the modern world, any classification of great powers must examine multiple dimensions beyond simply the number of troops or tanks each nation has. To this end, we use a streamlined version of Kenneth Waltz’s great power criterion as put forward by Vesna Danilovic, which considers a state’s power capabilities, the geographic scope of their interests, and international acknowledgement of their status.²⁵ Under these criteria, the following seven states are

classed as great powers: the United States, China, France, the United Kingdom, Russia, Germany, and Japan.

All great powers are within the top nine for military expenditure; all but Russia are within the top seven for nominal GDP; and, aside from Japan and Germany for historical reasons, all are nuclear armed members of the UN Security Council.²⁶ Interestingly, all seven great powers are among the top performers when it comes to elite sport success as measured by the Olympic medal table rankings. Elite sport success is a very costly exercise inextricably linked to a country's hard power, and is another way to accrue soft power via sport through "diplomats in tracksuits" representing a nation abroad.²⁷ Equally, the pomp surrounding the medal ceremony and even the national flags carried on a lap of honor all remind the spectator of the athletes' country of origin. Of the seven states, all but France and Japan have finished within the top six on the medal table at the past three Olympics, with all seven states having finished in the top 15 since 2000.²⁸

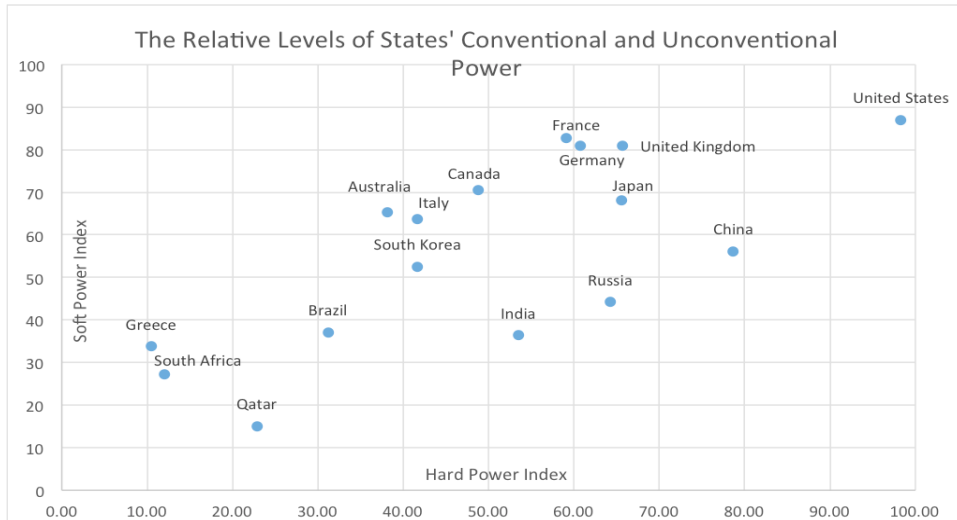
Of the great powers, China and Russia are clearly second-rate when compared with, for example, the British or French strength in "attraction." Both China and Russia have focused instead on their conventional strengths, with China's economy growing at an incredible rate and Russia maintaining an impressive military.²⁹ The two authoritarian great powers offer an interesting counterpart to the likes of Canada, Australia, South Korea, and smaller Western European nations, who are far from great power status based on their conventional capabilities yet possess impressive levels of soft power. As we discuss, this group can be understood as "sporting nations" who invest heavily in elite sport and SMEs to maintain their high levels of soft power. They are also—apart from Italy—among the most frequent SME hosts. The different characteristics of these states, and the differences in both conventional and soft power between them, have a huge influence on the motivations behind hosting a mega-event, as well as their soft power strategies emanating from them.

Soft Power Strategies

Whether it is Japanese manga or the English Premier League, the subtle international effect of such influences grants the state it originates from a level of unconventional power. Indexes, especially the Soft Power 30, also highlight the immense strength of Western-aligned, liberal democratic states by this measure. We turn to Graph 1 below to explore differences in states' use of SMEs to acquire soft power.³⁰ The intention of Graph 1 is to display indicative trends in the

distribution of soft and hard power, and we are fully aware of the difficulties of attempting to plot both “hard” and “soft” power. Much of the discourse on the relationship between SMEs and soft power analyzes the use of mega-events as a vehicle for soft power growth, a description which can often be too simplistic to describe the motivations of the host state.

Graph 1: Hard and Soft Power in SME-Hosting States³¹



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The characteristics of the host nation have a profound effect on its approach to hosting a mega-event, and a state lacking in soft power will not necessarily seek to redress this soft power weakness via the mega-event. SMEs are expensive endeavors, subject to the same cost-benefit analysis as are all of a state’s political actions. For a state like Russia, whose power is based on military capability, an increase in soft power does not fulfill such a cost-benefit analysis and, as such, will not be their primary aim.

The United States is the strongest state in terms of both hard and soft power, the most successful Olympic nation in terms of overall medals won, and a “serial” host of SMEs—it has hosted eight Olympic Games and will host a ninth in 2028, more than any other nation. However, since 2000, the United States has only hosted one SME, the scandal-hit, second-order Winter Olympics at Salt Lake City. The United States is due to host the 2021 IAAF World Athletics Championships in Eugene, Oregon, and then, after a 32-year hiatus, return to a first-order event in 2028 with the Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. Given the United States’ previously unassailable lead in terms of power, it has likely not deemed it necessary to host a first-order event, although it tried and failed

in a bid for the 2016 Olympics.³²

The cluster of European powers—Germany, France, and the United Kingdom—score highly on both soft and hard power. The United Kingdom has, in the last three Olympic cycles, massively improved their sporting soft power through finishes of fourth, third, and second respectively on the hal-
lowed Olympic medal tables in 2008, 2012, and 2016—actually improving on their 2012 home advantage in the following Olympics. This state-sanctioned investment in elite sport has been accompanied by a desire to host SMEs; the United Kingdom will have hosted more than any other great power between 2002 (Commonwealth Games, Manchester) and 2022 (Commonwealth Games, Birmingham), including a Summer Olympics (2012) and a number of second-order events. The United Kingdom’s strategy—and that of France, Germany, and Japan to a certain extent—is what we term “defensive marketing,” that is, SMEs are not equated with growing soft power or enhancing an image, as the United Kingdom is already top of most soft power rankings and one of the favorites of foreign publics.³³ However, in an ever-changing world and with the rise of China and other emerging states, defensive strategies aim to consolidate existing leading positions.³⁴ The key messages from the 2012 Olympics were that the United Kingdom clearly has the capabilities and willingness to do business with the rest of the world and is democratic and forward-thinking, even if the security surrounding the Games involved the “biggest mobilisation of military and security forces since the second world war.”³⁵ Germany, France, and the United Kingdom also invest heavily in intercultural institutions in order to bring their culture and language to the world through the Goethe Institut, the British Council, and the Institut Francais. Japan, another great power, also operates a defensive marketing strategy, as it too enjoys high levels of soft and hard power. As a regional power, Japan, which hosted the very first Asian Olympics in 1964 as part of its post-war reconciliation with the world, has hosted or will host no fewer than five SMEs between 2002 and 2026, including joint hosting the FIFA World Cup in 2002 and the Summer Olympics in 2020.

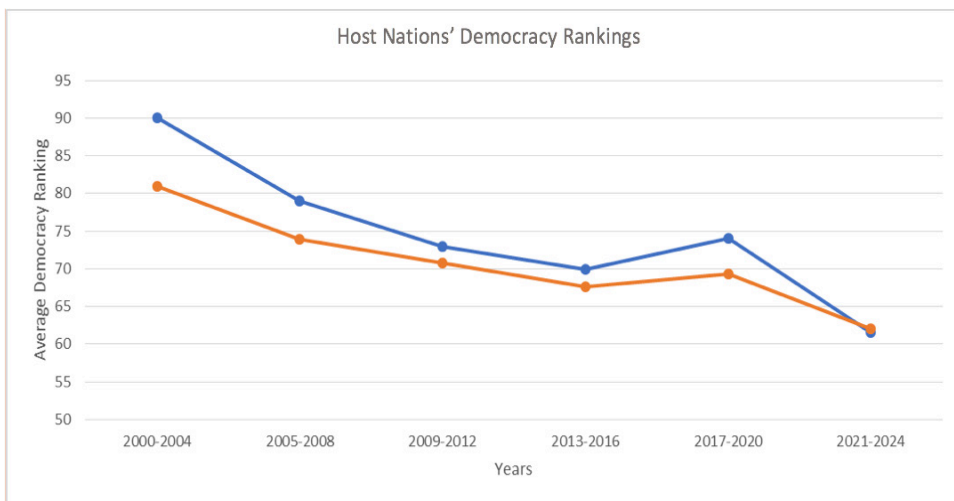
Emerging states—grouped together in the acronym “BRICS” (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa)—differ greatly from one another as we can see in Graph 1. China is by far the strongest economically, and increasingly politically, to such a degree that the very label of “emerging” seems incorrect. Its use of elite sport is similar to the United States—resources are sunk into elite sport systems to produce medals. China has been busier than the United States in hosting or winning the right to host many SMEs; however, China comes in just under the United Kingdom and matches Japan with five events, including

the Summer Olympics (2008), the Winter Olympics, and the Asian Games in the same year (2022).

When it comes to assessing a state's use of an SME to generate soft power, the state's regime type matters and many "emerging states" are either nascent democracies or authoritarian and use different soft power strategies. We concur with Watson that a distinction ought to be made between state-led soft power strategies and more "organic" soft power strategies.³⁶ Although Watson uses the example of South Korea, authoritarian states generally use a state-led strategy (e.g., China, Qatar, and Russia). State-led soft power strategies are centrally funded affairs; for example, China is currently engaged in a soft power offensive through the targeted promotion of its Confucius Institutes abroad. The Institutes aim to spread China's culture and language and have so far been set up in some 140 countries worldwide. This, alongside the \$900 billion new "One Belt, One Road" project, is part of China's attempt to make itself more attractive and gain soft power.³⁷ Twenty-first century SME hosts are also shifting toward "emerging" and less democratic states. Graph 2 uses the Economist Intelligence Unit and Freedom House Think Tank's Democracy Rankings list to show the relative decline of host state's democracy rankings in the period 2000–2024.

Graph 2: Host Nations' Democracy Rankings, 2000–2024

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While it is possible to argue about the merits of such rankings, they clearly indicate a shift among SME hosts toward less or nascent democratic states, including China, Qatar, Russia, South Africa, Brazil, Indonesia, Ukraine, Mexico, India, and Bangladesh. Taken together, and despite the noted differences among

them, we discern an emerging states SME strategy, which is usually linked to attempting to burnish a state's image abroad and move beyond a negative past (e.g. Brazil's military dictatorship).

Both China and Russia, among the strongest emerging states, have also used a state-led, two-pronged approach to sport with external and domestic soft power strategies, the latter to generally shore up political legitimacy at home.³⁸ Domestic soft power is important in authoritarian states to ensure the political legitimacy of the ruling party; in a democratic state it is highly likely, for example, that the political party that bids for an event will not be in power when the event takes place up to seven years later. In an authoritarian state this is not usually a concern. Russia is less concerned about international opinion and image enhancement, as evidenced by its actions during the Sochi Olympics in 2014 (namely its annexation of Crimea and its controversial banning of homosexuality), than it is on domestic soft power, national identity building (especially post-1991), and political legitimacy.³⁹ Russia's stance on Syria—which is in clear opposition to the West—is yet another example of a state not trying to win over the hearts and minds of foreign publics. Rather, this is a state that is carving its own foreign policy and showing it is not kowtowing to the United States or Europe. Both states use SMEs to “showcase” themselves and their growing strength, but importantly *not* “to signal their ‘graduation’ to the status...of advanced state,” but rather to indicate their alternative modernity and development to both a domestic audience and international actors.⁴⁰ Such a strategy we label as “Dual Soft Power.” All states attempt to mobilize an event domestically as well as internationally, but non-democratic states use these opportunities to shore up political legitimacy by securing domestic and political loyalty; for example, by ensuring key political allies and their regions benefit.⁴¹

Brazil, the leading state in South America, has been poised for a long time to move from regional leader to global player. Winning the bid of two first-order SMEs to be held in quick succession (FIFA World Cup in 2014 and Rio Olympics in 2016) set up Brazil to boost its global ambitions. Unfortunately, an economic downturn, political corruption, and infighting have prevented Brazil from gaining as much traction as it would have hoped from the very expensive hosting of two sports events (the World Cup alone was estimated to cost between \$15 and \$25 billion). This is reflected in Brazil's position on the graph—it has not received a soft power boost from two SMEs that have cost in the region of \$30 billion which could have been conceivably spent elsewhere.⁴² South Africa, well known for hosting the 1995 Rugby World Cup that signaled the nation's end of the Apartheid regime, hosted the Cricket World Cup in 2003, and then

the FIFA World Cup in 2010. South Africa had two failed bids for the 2011 and 2015 Rugby World Cups and won the bid for the 2022 Commonwealth Games. However, Durban was later stripped of the tournament due to concerns about its financial capabilities to host. As can be seen, South Africa suffers from a lack of both soft and hard power relative to our other hosts. Interestingly, both Brazil and South Africa do not appear to have benefitted from hosting SMEs: the former has experienced an economic downturn and political corruption on an unprecedented scale, while the latter remains the most unequal society among the BRICS countries.

Another group of highly advanced middle powers—Canada, Australia, South Korea, and Italy—use sport as a substitute for their lack of relative hard power compared to the great powers. All, apart from Italy, invest heavily in hosting SMEs: Australia and South Korea have hosted five in our time period. Canada has an advanced elite sport system and has been dubbed a “serial” host of SMEs.⁴³ All of these middle powers perform well in the Olympic medal tables.⁴⁴ South Korea is another active host, co-hosting a first-order event—the FIFA World Cup 2002—with Japan and itself hosting the Winter Olympics 2018, one of the most prized second-order events available. South Korea is even considering a joint Olympic bid for 2032 with North Korea, which would see the world’s most undemocratic state join the Olympic family. All of these middle powers understand themselves as “sporting nations,” invest heavily in soft power resources to promote their nations on the world stage, and enjoy a high quality of life and democratic governance. This promotion is focused outwardly, aiming to cultivate a positive image of these states abroad, thereby offering a myriad of benefits. These may come through maintaining or increasing the high level of tourism for states like Italy or Australia, or by granting states such as Canada an international role incommensurate with its level of conventional power—for example, being the state behind the unanimous United Nations adoption of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine.⁴⁵ Domestically, sport plays a central part in these nation’s understanding of their own national identity, hence we term such middle powers with high soft power scores “sporting states.”

A key point to make in understanding state strategies to seek soft power through SMEs is to consider the reputation of a particular nation: if a state has a checkered past, it has far more to gain but also far more to lose from hosting an SME. South Africa (apartheid), Brazil (military dictatorship), Russia (Cold War), China (previously a communist pariah), India (underdeveloped image), and Germany (tarnished standing due to World War II) all used SMEs to try and alter often outdated perceptions of their nations. However, hosting an SME can

backfire, and only a few examples exist where such events have actually enhanced a nation's image.⁴⁶ The influx of unprecedented media attention during an SME can render this an exercise in "soft disempowerment"—that is, leaving the host worse off than before due to uncovering scandals, failure to complete sports facilities, and the like.⁴⁷ Brazil and India are both examples of this: Brazil's dual hosting strategy took place against the backdrop of an economic downturn and political turmoil that led to the impeachment of its president, Dilma Rousseff. India's hosting of the 2010 Commonwealth Games, widely seen as a preamble to a full-blown Olympic bid, ended in a disaster of unfinished buildings, corruption, and disease.⁴⁸

Unique Cases

A number of unique or outlier cases remain among our sample of twenty-first century first-order hosts. Take for example Greece, which is not a great power and ranks only twenty-third on the 2018 Portland Soft Power Index, yet hosted the Olympics in 2004, winning against other bidding cities of Rome, Cape Town, Stockholm, and Buenos Aires.⁴⁹ Since the Athens Olympics, Greece's economy has collapsed. One explanation for the choice of Athens as the host of the 2004 Olympics, however, is that it was the birthplace of the Olympic Games.⁵⁰

Qatar is another clear outlier in our analysis. It is not a great power or even a regional power, but is due to host a first-order event (the FIFA Soccer World Cup in 2022) and has already hosted several second-order events (for example, the IAAF World Indoor Championships, 2010; the UCI World Cycling Championships, 2016). While Qatar's inclusion in the pantheon of first-order hosts can, in part, be explained simply by FIFA's rationale to expand its business to "new lands," we now know that the voting behind the winning bid was mired in corruption. The consequences of this decision, and a number of the practices linked to the building of sports stadiums, have led to a case of "soft disempowerment."⁵¹ Two conclusions can be drawn from the two unique cases above. First, Greece was not in a financial position to benefit from hosting a first-order SME. Greece would have clearly benefitted from investing resources into its own economy instead of on a raft of disused "White Elephants" (sports facilities) that precipitated its financial collapse.⁵² Second, wide-scale corruption will negatively impact the desired soft power outcome of the event (e.g., India's hosting of the 2010 Commonwealth Games, Brazil's role as double SME host in the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Rio Olympics). Any state seeking to generate soft power through an SME needs to be aware of the intensive glare

of the global media. Qatar controversially gained the hosting rights for the 2022 FIFA World Cup a full 12 years before the tournament, instead of the usual six years. This has allowed very close scrutiny of, among others, its Kafala labor system and treatment of foreign construction workers, which has led to the opposite effect of what Nye suggests: “If its [a state’s] culture and ideology are attractive, others will more willingly follow.”⁵³

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have set out to explore the differences in unconventional diplomacy strategies across states, specifically the acquisition of soft power via SMEs. If we discount the United States as an outlier because of its relative hard and soft power compared to the rest of the world, then it becomes possible to discern *four* SME soft power strategies. While these strategies are not mutually exclusive, they do help us understand different rationales and motives behind the hosting of SMEs. First, we identified what could be termed a “Defensive Marketing” strategy undertaken by great powers and liberal democracies (e.g., the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Japan), the purpose of which is not to improve on soft power, but to maintain the nations’ leading positions relative to others. Second, we identified a “dual soft power” strategy employed by authoritarian regimes such as China and Russia. Here the purpose is as much to shore up political legitimacy and promote national identity as it is to showcase the nation. A third strategy is undertaken by advanced middle powers who have high levels of existing soft power but are not as strong on hard power as the great powers. Canada, Italy, Australia, and South Korea are all “sporting nations” who invest heavily in soft power resources to promote their nations on the world stage. All—except Italy—are also serial SME hosts, constantly bidding for and hosting events. Finally, we note an “emerging state” strategy of attempting to use SMEs to “put their nations on the map,” and usually to move beyond a negative past (e.g., apartheid in South Africa). Without the requisite hard power resources, many of these attempts backfire or lead to negative media attention. While this analysis is rudimentary, it is the first that attempts to categorize the major SME hosts in terms of *why* and *how* they strategize regarding the role of sport in soft power acquisition. As such, it helps scholarship move beyond the platitudes of “sports mega-events equals soft power,” which simply overlooks a much more complex set of economic, political, and cultural factors that influence each host and their motivations. ●

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